

There will be no defense for the Priest and the Levite today.

Their responses to the body on the side of the road were based on fear. And the heart of the gospel is that perfect love casts out fear. We need look no further than the tragedy of Trayvon Martin's death to be reminded that fear leads to all manner of suffering. When the world is divided into "like" and "not like," nothing good is going to come of it. That is what made this parable that we read from the Lectionary this morning, so poignant. And we can't engage the gospel today and think that it doesn't have something to say to us about the way we live in the world, and the world in which we live.

Now, I want to be very clear. I have no intention of retrying George Zimmerman in church today. First, I have no competence to do so. I was not on the jury. I am not a judge. I'm not a lawyer. Whether we agree or disagree with the verdict, though, it's on our minds. Isn't it? To be sure, one must be careful of confusing one's opinion with the Word of God. But at the same time, we know that this is a story of tragedy. And I know that you didn't come here today, thinking that the gospel has nothing to say to tragedy.

The simple truth is that a story about neighbors demands an answer from the church. If the society in which we live has a problem with gun violence, then the church has a problem with gun violence. And if the people who are our friends and neighbors, or casual acquaintances, or even passing strangers are sequestered into living in fear and pain, then the church is living in in fear and pain as well.

If you grew up in the church, no doubt you have heard this story many times. It's a Sunday School classic, and there is a reason for that. It has great moral force behind it, and it satisfies our need to have something we can actually *do* when the dust settles. There is good. There is bad in this story. They are not the same. The line is clearly drawn, or so it would seem. But if you're new to this text, let me share a few details about the context that might shed little light on it. The main characters are the Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan. The first two characters, the Priest and the Levite are basically a preacher and an elder.

Because they are preachers and elders in the temple system, their jobs require that they maintain ritual purity, and ritual purity shouldn't be taken lightly. If the body on the side of the road was dead, then they lose their ritual purity. And regaining their ritual purity is not like scrubbing in for surgery. It takes a few weeks of seclusion and necessary rites to regain their purity. In the meantime, they are excluded from functioning in the temple community in the way that they are supposed to. It would be to their mind a certain dereliction of duty to cross the street and to risk losing the ability to do their jobs. That's the rationale. This response says that policy is more important than people.

For all I know, the Priest and the Levite were good people. In fact, I were a betting man, I would say they were probably very good people, deeply concerned with the demands of

the Law on their lives. But their actions were wrong.

For years we have downplayed the significance of the Samaritan's actions by focusing on what poor examples of humanity the Priest and Levite appear to represent.

Have you ever wondered why we call the story the Parable of the Good Samaritan? If you look closely at your Bible, you realize that in the body of the text that description never occurs. In some versions of the Bible, it's a little heading for that particular portion of Scripture. But those little headings you encounter in the Bible are not part of the original text. They are later additions; an editor put them in there to make it easy for us to read. But they are not part of the Bible. Nowhere in this story does Jesus call this man a good Samaritan; he is just a Samaritan. "Good" is applied after the fact, in hindsight, not by Jesus. It's a qualifier, so that we will understand that this is not just any Samaritan. This is a good Samaritan, not to be confused with those other Samaritans, the not so good Samaritans. Jesus, though, makes no distinction. He is just a Samaritan. You see, for Jesus' audience, a good Samaritan would've been an oxymoron. Jesus' audience would have very quickly and efficiently relegated that Samaritan into a category that is very easy to define: it's *those* people, not us, not one of ours, outside the group. He's *those* people. Those are dangerous divisions.

A Samaritan, just for historical context, was a part of a group of people who occupied the land of Israel following their conquest by Assyria. This particular group of folks opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, and they consequently built their own temple a few miles away on Mount Gerazim and completely rejected the authority of the Jerusalem temple. In other words, in the eyes of the good Jews who would've known them, they were occupiers who had taken the Jewish religion, and perverted it. They'd set themselves outside of orthodoxy. They were the heretics, you see. A good Jew would have walked around the entire region of Samaria, sooner than stepping one foot in it, because *those* people lived there. That's the Jewish point of view. From the Samaritan point of view, they had to start their own temple, because the Jews in Jerusalem were never going to allow them to be a part of that temple community in any real and meaningful way. They would be excluded from leadership because of popular prejudice. To the Samaritans of the first century, the Jews were completely unwilling to be confused by the facts, and ignored the reality that within 50 years of the Assyrian conquest, the very people who had left, had come back, and intermarried with the occupiers. They were part of the life of the community. It is this group from which the Samaritans are descended.

But having said all that, perhaps it makes a little more sense my having said these two groups of people did not have any use for each other. In the ears of Jesus' listeners, that Samaritan was already a heretic, already impure. I suppose if you want to rationalize it, it's not that big a deal that he stopped and took care of that man. When you look at it from a certain point of view, it's just not really that big a deal.

Except that it really is. It really is that big a deal. There's no way to explain away what the Samaritan did. You see that's the problem with trying to mount a defense for the

Priest and the Levite. We don't know the first thing about them, other than what they didn't do. What they did was just not much of anything. That seems to be the problem.

That is also what makes what the Samaritan did extraordinarily good. That really is Jesus' point at the end of the story. He could've told the story to that young lawyer using any number of participants. But he didn't. He chose a Samaritan. You see, he wanted to highlight something with the language that he was using. He chose to highlight what would've surely seemed like a paradox to the listeners. The heretic doing what the priest failed to do -- that's sort of like the atheist doing the good work that the Christian fails to do. Jesus' point isn't so much that the Priest and the Levite didn't do anything, as it is that the Samaritan did. It's a moral object lesson to be sure, but the lesson is a little more cryptic than an easy glance might suggest. It's an object lesson as to who are and who are not the people of God.

As we consider the implications of this text for our lives as Christians, you see, we have to acknowledge that this story leaves us with expectations. When Jesus is talking to this lawyer, it is clear that he is not telling the story for the purpose of making anyone feel good. He is telling the story in order to make it clear that the gospel places expectations upon our lives, which is why I don't particularly like the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

I was talking with one of our volunteers who answers the phones in the church office during the week, recently, when I had the epiphany that this could, in fact, be something of a dangerous text to preach. Far from being a moral object lesson, this text is in fact positively subversive in the extent to which it is a call to discipleship. It is a call to inclusivity, and it is generally unwilling to let us get away with any complacency. As I thought about that, I didn't like the idea that I could stand here in this particular pulpit and suggest that we need a greater level of discipleship, even a dangerous level of discipleship. It concerns me greatly. It occurred to me that one of you might actually take me seriously and go and do something that would put you in danger, and you might get hurt in the process. That sort of thing would challenge the faith of our whole community, were it to happen. But the volunteer said to me, "But I still believe in the story of the Good Samaritan. I still believe that we are called to take that risk."

The Kingdom of God is a phrase that occurs over and over again in the New Testament. You can't read the words of Jesus without encountering it periodically. What's so interesting about it is that it is an active phrase. The people of God - the gospel shows us over and over and over again - are the people who are doing the work of God. Nowhere is this more clear than in Mark's Gospel account. We're reading from Luke, but Luke and Matthew both took their narrative structure from Mark. And throughout the Gospel of Mark, you'll see a paradigm wherein someone believes that they had the kingdom of God sewn up, wrapped up, right there in their hand. It's so clear what God wants from them, and in a blink of an eye, it switches. It becomes clear that what God calls for from us is discipleship, is following, is a willingness to listen and look, and to hear and see what God is calling us to do that is different from what we might have expected. And that when we do that, that's when we're behaving as God's people.

I hear a lot about the fracturing of community, about the ways we divide ourselves up, ways that we put up barriers between ourselves, political polarization, red states, blue states, purple states, blue states that turn red, red states that turn blue. I hear a lot about income inequality and class. You know, the 19th century British thought they had the class system sewn up. I'm not so convinced that they have it nailed down. Here are the ways that we divide ourselves up. The reality about all these ways in which the world is divided is that what they do is to claw at the fabric of humanity that God has created. They attempt to shred that which God has made the Shalom, the peaceable kingdom that God wishes for God's creation into tatters, into separate, different, like, not like, Jew, Samaritan, Christian, Atheist.

When I think about that, it makes the reality that this congregation is a place of intentional inclusivity all the more precious to me, and I hope to you as well. But this story says that God wants even more from us. When we Christians are at our best, we are living the kingdom of God; our lives become pockets of that kingdom here in the world.

When Jesus turned that lawyer's question back on him, he answered correctly with an old creed of Judaism, straight from the heart of the Law: that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our strength, with all our soul, with all our mind. Jesus asked him a question and he nailed the answer. He got it right. "Yes," Jesus said.

But what he wanted then from Jesus was an answer to just how much that demanded. Who, after all, is my neighbor? Just how much, God, do you really want from me? What is the bare minimum I can skate in on here?

Who, after all, is our neighbor? Just how big, God, is that expectation? Just how much of our lives do you want? Loving God demands that we love our neighbors; that seems to be clear. The lawyer wanted to know who his neighbor was, and rather than answering, rather than giving a criteria that we can apply as for whom we should and should not help, Jesus answered with a parable, with a story about an outsider, acting in love with really nothing whatsoever to gain from it. You see, the Hebrew Law of Leviticus had already answered that question, and the lawyer wanted clarification. When Jesus answers, he does not clarify the Law instead, he intensifies it. Instead he turns it to gospel. He doesn't say who is neighbor is, he says what a neighbor is. And then he adds that little line at the end: Go and do likewise.

It is pretty simple. I can't imagine this escapes any of us. We can't love God and not love our neighbors. John says it so clearly. "Those who say they love God and despise their brothers are liars." It's so simple, and yet it's not. Jesus won't tell us who our neighbor is. He insists on telling us how to be a neighbor. That is positively maddening because it won't let us get away with anything! Sometimes I want to get away with something! Don't you? I want it to be just a little easier, the demands of the gospel not be so all-encompassing, all the time. All my life, really, you want it all? Really? Can't we just back it off a tiny bit? Just let me get away with something here. Maybe you felt that way from time to time.

That's why I can't really defend the Priest and the Levite. It's not that they were so bad. There's nothing to indicate they were. It's that God is clear. God wants all of our lives, every bit of our lives. So maybe a word is in order about that. God has called us - this congregation - to be a place of deep welcome, deep compassion. It's hard work. But remember, community is made by the Holy Spirit, by the sharing of our lives with each other, with those outside our community. That is a huge demand that we would be incapable of, except for Christ's love for us.

That can be hard to quantify sometimes, so let me tell you a story instead. Fred Craddock told the story number of years ago. He was speaking to a minister friend of his, and he tells this. There is a young man in the hospital here in Atlanta in the 80s. He was in his early 20s, and he was dying of AIDS. As you know, in the early 80s, there was a great deal of confusion about what exactly caused this disease, how you could catch it. The story goes the young man was not in a church, but some of his family had some recollection of a church connection somewhere way back when. As the young man was approaching death, they called a nearby church, and the minister went to the hospital and stood out in the hall, opposite the room, and yelled in a prayer. And this minister, this other friend of Fred Craddock's, said that she heard about it, and so she rushed to the hospital, and went into the room, and went over to the bed and cradled the young man's head in her arms, sang to him, read Scriptures, and prayed until he died.

As she was telling her preaching class about it, some said to her, "But weren't you afraid?"

"Yes, of course I was afraid!" She said, "I went home, and I bathed and I pray, and I bathed and I prayed again."

Then they said to her, "Then why did you do it?"

"I just kept thinking, what if the call had come to Jesus to go to the hospital?"¹

That's why I can't really mount a defense for the Priest and the Levite; it's not that I don't want to. It's not that I don't want to try. It's not that what they did doesn't make sense. The problem is -- what they did makes too much sense. And it's all too easy to do that.

But what's more, I don't really want to learn to be like that Samaritan, so I can check off a list of expectations. There's absolutely no grace in that. If being a Christian becomes about fulfilling obligations, then we've missed the point, just as much is that lawyer. You see, the calling to the Christian life is a calling to a changed life. It's a calling to a life called to change the world, to change how we live in it, and how the world interacts with one another, by starting with ourselves, by learning to see the world through different eyes: No Jews, no Samaritans, just God's children. When we learn to do this, it's possible we might be able to see the world and see its deep need, rather than the fear that would prevent us from acting.

¹ Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories.

As I think about the call of this church, of Morningside Presbyterian Church, it is very clear to me, just as clear as the word the young lawyer received, getting that old creed of Judaism. Our call is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength; that means loving our neighbors as ourselves. When I come back to the will of Jesus Christ for you and for me, I come back to that old creed of Judaism, straight from the heart of the Law. And that reminds me of another spot where Jesus asked the question about the intent of the gospel, where he says that I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly. Abundant life. That's what the gospel means, and when pressed on it, Jesus refused to compromise even a little bit about what that means. That's what it means to be a place of deep hospitality as a church; in our homes. That's what means to be a place of deep compassion and deep welcome. The simple truth of the matter is all too often, far too often, there is a very easy alternative that will be offered. The claim of the gospel is that Jesus wants better for us. "Go," he said, "and do likewise."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.